

# The Gaon of Wilna

A Review of His Life and Influence

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## P R E F A C E.

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THE present work deals with the life and importance of one of the most remarkable figures in Jewish history. There is scarcely a reader of Hebrew to whom the name of the Gaon Elijah of Wilna is not more or less familiar. Yet, often as his name occurs in Hebrew literature, and significant as are his achievements in numerous fields of endeavor, he is quite unknown even by name to the reader who is dependent for his information upon English publications. This work would seem, therefore, to require no apology; but a word or two as to its nature may not be out of place.

One of the most difficult tasks connected with the compilation and presentation of the material before us consisted in discriminating between the true reports about the Gaon's life and work, and such exaggerated and fictitious statements as will always gather about the memory of the truly great. This undertaking was the more difficult as almost all of his biographers, in

their intense admiration for the man, have permitted themselves to be influenced by popular notions about him. I have endeavored to avoid falling into a similar error, and have omitted all accounts which seemed to me to bear the stamp of legendary origin, except a few examples which I have preserved for purposes of illustration and have grouped in a separate chapter under the head of legends. If after that my description still appear too partial and favorable, the fact will be due not to blind admiration on the part of the writer, but to the surpassing greatness of one of Israel's rare geniuses whose life forcibly calls to mind the Talmudic exclamation:

"**וְאֵלֹהִים** **וְאֵלֶיךָ** **יְהוָה** **מְלֹא** **כָּל** **חַדְשָׁה**"

In conclusion I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my friend Mr. Ephraim Deinard for having placed at my disposal his magnificent collection of Hebrew books and manuscripts. My thanks are also due to Mr. A. S. Freidus, of the New York Public Library, for assistance rendered in the gathering of material. And lastly I acknowledge my obligation to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Joseph Jasin, for some valuable suggestions.

Duluth, Minn., Sept., 1905.

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# THE CAON OF WILNA.

## CHAPTER I.

### HIS LIFE.

ELIJAH, son of Solomon, was born on Tuesday, the 15th of Nissan (April 24th), 1720 (1), in Wilna, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." His father was a very poor but learned man, who occupied himself with nothing but the study of the Law, and who was supported from a fund which a relative, R. Moses Rivkes, had left for indigent scholars.

Elijah was very handsome and displayed great cleverness already as a child. At the age of six he was able to dispense with a teacher, and a few months thereafter he delivered an address in the "Grand Syna-

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(1) Elijah was born in 1720, and not as Graetz, Fuerst, and Steinschneider have it, in 1722. Their mistake is no doubt due to a mis-statement in the introduction to the Schulchan Aruch, where the date is given as 1722. That this is a mistake is evident, for in 1722 the 15th of Nissan fell on a Thursday and not on a Tuesday.

gogue" of Wilna. This address was taught him by his father, to whom, perhaps, most of the credit is due. However, the very fact that he was permitted, as a mere child of six and a half years to speak from a pulpit which was usually reserved for great and famous scholars, shows that he must already have been held in high esteem. His lecture surpassed all expectation, so much so, in fact, that R. Hoeschel, who was rabbi at that time, invited him to "*sholosh s'udoth*" (afternoon meal on Saturday) at his home, where all the scholars of Wilna were assembled. His wonderful subtlety of mind and extensive knowledge astonished all present.

As though fearing that he might be misled by his contemporaries, Elijah joined no Talmudical school, but studied alone. Only for six months did he go to Keidan to study under R. Moses Margolish. During his short stay in that town, one of the most prominent Jews in the place, R. Judah Loeb, engaged his daughter Treine to him.

After his return from Keidan, he began to study with unequalled assiduity. His

biographers (no doubt exaggerating somewhat) tell us that at the age of nine he was already versed in all the branches of Jewish lore, the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Code. The next six months he devoted to familiarizing himself with the Zohar. At the end of this period, in order to make up for his temporary neglect of Talmudical studies, he returned to them with increased zeal. When the eve of Simchath Torah came, he had still to go through two of the most difficult tractates, Zebachim and Menachoth, but he completed them in one night. When this became known he was examined in these tractates and was found to know them by heart. His natural endowments were so great that at the age of ten he had already the knowledge of a Talmudic scholar. When he was eleven he was not only a thorough Hebraist but had also unravelled the mysteries of the Kabbalah; and at the age of thirteen he was recognized by all Talmudists as a great and accomplished scholar. In addition to his native powers he possessed a real love for learning. He not only sought to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Baby-

lonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the *Tosephtha*, *Mechilta*, *Siphri*, and *Siphro*, the earlier and later *Poskim*, and grammar, which the other Talmudists of his time entirely neglected, but he also studied physics, mathematics, astronomy, metaphysics, music and medicine, as far as these branches were accessible to him. This love of study seems to have made even the laws of nature subservient to him, for he slept only two out of the twenty-four hours, and partook during the day of only two meals consisting of dry bread and water. On cold winter nights he would have no fire in his room lest he should fall asleep, yet his health was not affected by this mode of living.

In order to experience all the hardships of "*goluth*" he left his home in 1740 and traveled, clad like a beggar, through Poland and Germany. At first he was taken for insane in many places on account of his wearing the *talith* and *tephilin* and because of the constant moving of his lips in study. Later, however, he must have been recognized, for upon his return to Wilna in 1748 (2), he was so famous that when a con-

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(2) Cf. *Introduction to Shulchan Aruch*

troversy between R. Jonathan Eibenschuetz and R. Jacob Emden broke out, the former, though Elijah's senior by about thirty years, appealed to him in a letter for a decision of the case (3). Referring to that letter, Eibenschuetz writes:

כִּי שְׁלַחְתִּי פִּירּוֹשִׁי לְקָ"ק וּוּילְנָא  
כִּי בַּיחֹור שְׁמָעָתִי בַּתּוֹךְ חַכְמֵי הָעִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל  
אַחֲרֵי הַמִּיּוֹחֵד קָדוֹשׁ וּטְהוֹרָ מָאֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל  
כָּלְלָה כָּל הַחַכְמָות חֹ"ב וְלוּ עַשְׂרָה יִדּוֹת  
בְּנַסְתָּר מָוֹ"ה אַלְיָ"ז וְזַי אֲשֶׁר נָדַע תְּהִלָּתוֹ  
בְּכָל אָרֶץ פּוֹלִין וּבְרְלִין וְלִימָסָא מָקוֹם שְׁעַבְרָה  
הַחַסִּיד הַנָּ"ל סְפָרוֹ מִמְּנוֹ גְּדוּלָות.

In reply to this letter the Gaon wrote that, as a young man and so distant, he could not meddle in a controversy of such great scholars.

The position R. Elijah occupied at Wilna was that of a private individual. As Graetz remarks, he was the ideal teacher in the Talmudic sense, for he made his learning "neither a crown to decorate himself with nor a spade to dig with." He could never be prevailed upon to accept the position of rabbi or any other office in a Jewish community, a thing which was very unusual.

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(3) *Luchoth Hoeduth* 71b.

for a scholar in his time. The universal admiration he enjoyed and the influence he wielded, were due solely to his sound teaching and his exemplary life. The same modesty and love of independence which made him decline an office also forbade him to publish his works. At a time when the desire for fame and the fad of publishing works was so great among the Talmudical scholars, the Gaon did not publish any of his writings.

Ever happy and contented, his only wish was to go to Palestine for the purpose of settling there; and it is reported that at an advanced age he left Wilna for a journey to the Holy Land and that for some unknown reason he changed his plan and returned to his native town.

In spite of his hard labors and the many privations he had to endure, Elijah enjoyed good health almost all his life. In 1791 he became ill for the first time, but refused the services of a physician. Instead he sent for the Maggid Jacob of Dubno, whose learned conversation was a source of joy to him. He soon recovered and for five years again

enjoyed good health. In 1796 he became ill for the second time, but he recovered and resumed his work. Two years later he became ill for the third and last time. On the Eve of Atonement, 1798, he called his children together and blessed them as he felt his end approaching. From that time his illness grew daily, and on the fifth day of Sukkoth (October 10th), he died at the age of 78, with a contented smile on his face.

Contrary to the Jewish law which prohibits the holding of funeral services on a holiday, sermons were preached in every synagogue, and the death of the great and sainted man was universally mourned. It is reported that on the day of the funeral all the shops of the city were closed and that all the people went to pay the last tribute of respect to their departed leader, so that when the time arrived for *mincha no minyan* could be found:

The grief of Wilna was shared in by all the Jews of Russia and of other lands. "Wilna wept for the pride that was taken from her, the many disciples of the Gaon

bewailed the loss of their master and the Jews in general wept for the Ark of God that was taken away."

So great was felt to be the influence and authority of the Gaon's opinions, that after his death it was deemed necessary by the rabbis of Wilna to issue a circular prohibiting the use of his name as a sanction for any questionable act, except in cases where a definite statement bearing on the matter could be found in his writings.

The hundreds of funeral orations held on the death of Elijah, if gathered together would form a small library. Only six of these have been preserved and are enumerated in Jellinek's "*Kuntreth Hamaspid*" (p. 6):

- 1.—By Aaron of Kinishin in "*Adereth Elyahu*;" Warsaw, 1798.
- 2.—By Isaac Eizeck of Keidan, in "*Yekora Deshochbi*;" Altuna, 1799.
- 3.—By Moses Zeff, of Bialystok, in "*Agudath Ezob*;" Bialystok, 1804.
- 4.—By Hillel ben Zeff Wolf, of Bratzki, in "*Hillel ben Shachar*;" Bialystok, 1804.
- 5.—By Judah Loeb Edel Halevi, in

"*Aphike Jehudah*" (vol. I, serm. 8); Lemberg, 1824.

6.—By Abraham Danzig, author of "*Chaye Adam*" and "*Chachmath Adam*," in "*Sha'are Rachamim*," Wilna, 1871.

Shortly after his death, a tombstone was erected on his grave bearing the following inscription:

אהה!

רְבָנוֹ הַגָּדוֹל עַל מֵי אֹתוֹנוֹ נִטְשָׁת וְעֹזְבָת  
רְבָנוֹ אֶלְיָהוּ עַלְהָ הַשְׁמִים, קָרְעָו לְכָכֶם,  
לְשָׁנִים עַשְׁר קָרְעִים  
בְּחָג הַאֲסִיף שְׁמָחָת לְבָבֵי, נָאָסָפָ אָבֵי, אָבֵי,  
מֵי יָטָע בְּכָרְמֵי זְרֻעִים?  
אוֹי נָא לָהּ אָמְרָה אָרֶץ, כִּי אָבְדָה כְּלֵי  
חַמְדָתָה, הָוִי עַל יְמִיה הַרְעִים  
לִיל וּוּוּ 'תֹשִׁי', תְשׁוּעִי חַי יְוָהָרָה דָעָה מֵי  
יְבִין שְׁמוֹעַ, מֵי גָּלָל 'הַלְכָה' לְרָגְעִים  
יּוֹם יּוֹם שְׁוֹמְעִי שְׁמַעַךְ אַוְתֵךְ יְדָרְשָׁו  
לְשָׁמּוּעַ תּוֹרַת אֶמֶת בְּפִיקָה כִּי נָעִים  
הַתּוֹרָה תַתֵּן קוֹל, אָנִי חַכְמָה שְׁכַנְתִּי בְּלֵב  
אֶלְיָי, עַקְבָּתוֹי, בְּחַבֵּל נָוְדָעִים  
וְעַתָּה נָאַלְמָתִי, יָד לְפָה שְׁמָתִי, עַד יַעֲלוּ  
לְצִיּוֹן מַוְשִׁיעִים  
גַם פְּרִישׁוֹת חִסְדָּיו, וְעַנוֹהָ מָה לְכָם מַחְשִׁי,  
אֶלְוִפִּיכְךָ אַיִן וְאַנְחָה, נְגַדְעִים  
אֶלְלָי לֵי תְזַעַק הַיְרָאָה וְהַחֲכָמָה, מֵי  
מְבַלְעָדוֹךְ יְשִׁמְעָנוּ לְכָל הַבָּאִים  
וּמְעָשֵׁי בְּרָאִישִׁת וּמְעָשֵׁה מְרַכְבָּה לְךָ נַתְגָּלוּ  
כְּבִימֵי הַתְּנָאֵי וְהַאֲמוֹרִים

נשארנו בלי כל לבשנו אבל מעטה, כי  
הורדנו מטה מטה, כמעט נגועים  
ה"ה הרב הנאון החסיד המפורה מס',  
גדול מרבן שלו, אוזן חקר ותבן מקרא,  
במשנה, בבלי, וירושלמי, תוספתא,  
ומכילתא, ספרא, וספרין, זוהר, והיכלות,  
ר"מ, וספר יצירה, וספר"צ לא הניח דבר  
קטן ודבר גדול עד כי הגדייל לушות ביום  
נתינתן מסיני, והחזיר מצות הרבה אשר  
נשכחו וחזר ויסגן, בבחורותו מאמ בטענוין'  
בני אדם, וקדש גנוו ונשנתו ליוצרו עד  
יום מותו, הוא מוריינו ורבינו, אור העולם,  
מקור החכמה והמודע, ראש גולת אריאן  
צפירת תפארת ישראל, רבינו הגויל מו'  
אליוו בהרב מו' שלמה זלמן זצ"ל עליה  
השימים ביום י"ט תשרי שנת התמי'י  
צביה לפ"ק.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE GAON IN LEGEND.

THE legends told about the Gaon are innumerable. The uneducated Jew—for there is not a single Jew in Russia, be he ever so ignorant, who does not know something of the “Wilnaer Gaon”—pictures him as an old man, bending in his *talith* and *t'philin* over a large scroll, in which he studies Mishna, Talmud, Poskim, and all other branches of knowledge, for, having mastered the entire literature, he could do nothing but go back to the original source of knowledge, “The Scroll.” The educated have a more correct idea of the man, but they too are influenced to some extent by the popular conception, as is shown in the writings on the Gaon. We shall cite only a few of the many widely-circulated anecdotes related of him:

After the years of his wanderings had expired, and Elijah was about to return to Wilna, the people of Lissa sent him with great pomp to Berlin, where a prominent

man awaited him and took him to his house. In the neighborhood lived a professor of astronomy, who was considered the greatest astronomer in the country. Having heard of the vast learning of the Gaon, he came to him and propounded a problem which the professors of the Academy had for years been vainly trying to solve. When the Gaon was shown the problem, he took a piece of paper and drew upon it some figures which, to the great astonishment of the professor, solved the entire difficulty.

On his way to Wilna he asked his coachman to stop and let him offer the "*min-chah*" prayer, agreeing to pay for the time lost in waiting. The Gaon descended from his place and commenced to pray. When he got to the "*sh'monah-essre*", the coachman drove off with his baggage. It was only with great difficulty that he finally arrived at Wilna, and there again he had to suffer through his piety and kind-heartedness.

The community of Wilna apportioned him a certain weekly sum for his support.

The messenger by whom the money was sent embezzled it week after week for several years, and though Elijah was aware of this, he would not disclose the man's dishonesty. When his wife complained about their poverty and want, he told her to go with the children to some neighbor's house at meal-times so that they might be offered some food. He himself had enough. The embezzlement of the money came to light when the dishonest messenger became very ill and confessed his wrong.

R. Saul of Wilna once entered the room where the Gaon was sleeping, and noticed that the latter looked care-worn. Upon being urged afterwards to account for this, Elijah replied that it grieved him to behold how the dead were being punished, especially those whom he knew when they were alive.

The Gaon's father once entered Elijah's *sukkah* on the third day of the Feast of Booths, and found his son in an unusually joyful mood. When asked for the cause of this, the Gaon told his father that the patriarch Jacob had visited him in his booth that morning.

He was once ready to depart from one city to another, and was waiting for his conveyance. When the carriage arrived at his door, however, he refused to enter it because he suspected that the cushion contained *shatnes*. Upon investigation it was found that his suspicion was well founded. Similarly, on a certain occasion, a myrtle was brought to him for his "*lulab*," which he threw aside without looking at it. A close examination revealed the fact that this myrtle was "*possul*."

When the Gaon studied he was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he could hear nothing of what was going on about him. Once, while lecturing to his disciples, a fearful storm broke out. When one of his hearers remarked the frightful thunder, the Gaon told him that that showed a lack of attention, for one has no right to hear a thunder-crash while studying.

In the "*Sichath Chulin Hechadash*" about twenty anecdotes are quoted in which he figures. One is about the Talmudic saying: (Pess. 83b).

This saying the Gaon once jokingly ex-

plained as meaning: "Though as a rule politeness requires that a visitor should do nothing until invited by his host, yet with regard to taking his leave, he should never wait until requested to depart."

While traveling through Germany, he once came to Zolkowo on the Eve of Passover, and became the guest of the rabbi. At the "*seder*" the host noticed that the stranger did not perform the ceremony according to the ancient custom. Since the Gaon was at that time but a very young man and not known, his departure from the time-honored custom was mistaken for arrogance and heresy. On the following morning the host related the incident to the scholars of the town who decided that the rabbi should examine his guest, and that if the latter were not able to display some evidence of learning, he should be punished for his wickedness. At the dinner-table the rabbi asked Elijah if he were able to discuss some Talmudic topic, and receiving no reply, he again asked whether, if some topic were discussed by another person, the young man could follow it understandingly. The guest replied in the

affirmative, and the rabbi proceeded to discourse on a deep subject wherein he displayed his learning. During the discourse the guest did not make a single remark, which provoked the rabbi to ask him whether he did not wish to have the discussion repeated, as he evidently had not understood it. Instead of a reply Elijah merely repeated verbatim what his host had said. This convinced the rabbi that the stranger was a man of unusual talent, and he abstained from further questioning.

The Gaon once said to R. David Samuel Feiges, on the evening following the Day of Atonement: "Come, let us lay the foundation for our *sukkah*." (4) R. Samuel procured some tools, and was about to begin the work, when the Gaon led him into his study, took the tractate "*Sukkah*," and invited R. Samuel to join him in reading it. R. Samuel now understood what the Gaon meant, and laughingly joined in the study of this tractate.

Whatever element of fiction may exist

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(4). It is customary, in order to go "from strength to strength," to begin the building of the *sukkah* as soon as the Day of Atonement is over.

in these stories, they are of considerable significance to us. For no matter what may be said of legends and their origin, this much is certain, that they show us the attitude of the people toward those about whom they are gathered. If we consider that it is only a little over a century since the death of Elijah, and that he is already, like Elijah of old, celebrated in hundreds of legends, we shall certainly be helped in forming a true conception of his greatness. Though his biographies show oriental exaggerations, it is nevertheless a fact that he was worthy of all the name "Gaon" implies, and it is equally true that during several centuries we have not had his like.

## CHAPTER III.

### IMPORTANCE OF THE GAON.

WE shall be in position to understand and appreciate the Gaon's work if we realize that he lived in an age in which rationalism, pietism, and pilpulistic scholarship flourished side by side, each of these tendencies struggling for the complete mastership. He gave to all these a new turn. Though very pious, he did not carry his piety to the point of fanaticism; his remarkable scholarship did not express itself in the mental gymnastics of the pilpulists; and his rationalism did not run mad. He combined these three into the enlightened study of theological and secular sciences, and the true observance of the "*mizvoth*." He perceived clearly, as did Mendelssohn, the necessity of a sweeping reform in Jewish studies. Each, however, was actuated by a different motive, that of Elijah being Jewish, that of Mendelssohn non-Jewish. Elijah desired to restore the true and beneficial study of the Talmud and the Bible, and also to spread the knowledge of

the Hebrew language and of Jewish teachings with the aid of other sciences; whereas Mendelssohn merely aimed to bring about an appreciation of modern culture, and employed the Hebrew as a means to that end. The one wished to have works from other languages translated into Hebrew so as to make them "Jewish;" the other translated Hebrew works into German so as to give them a German tinge (6).

The first thing, then, which Elijah did was to check mischievous pilpulism. During the Middle Ages the Talmud was studied not as a science but as a religion. The study itself was a meritorious, God-pleasing deed. It mattered little whether it led to practical results; the one who busied himself with the study of the Talmud was a righteous man and entitled to the support of the community. All of its teachings were beyond doubt true; the conclusions of its debates were fixed verities. To suggest that the knowledge of the Tannaim and Amoraim was deficient in certain

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(6). Cf., E. Schulman, in "*Mimkor Yisroel*" (p. 34), Vienna, 1786.

respects was a grievous sin. If inconsistencies, errors, and incongruities were found in the Talmud, they were to be explained away by dialectical methods, wherever this was possible; and where it was not, the teachings of the Talmud were still accepted as true, in the firm conviction that any lack of clearness was due entirely to the ignorance of the student. The Talmudist, therefore, not wishing to confess himself ignorant, would search deeply into every statement before putting it aside as inexplicable (7). Thus pilpulism developed, and dialecticism became so prevalent that every difficulty in the Talmud could in some way be bridged over. I. B. Levinson relates that the disciples of Jacob Pollock once tore out several pages of the tractate he was reading to them, and that to their great surprise their teacher read on without observing that any pages were missing, all the while combining, in a most subtle way, subjects which were not in any way connected. Nor was this objectionable, superficial method restricted to the study

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(7). Cf., H. Gersoni, in *The Independent*, Sept. 19, 1895.

of the Talmud alone. Every subject was studied not for the sake of knowledge, but in order to bring out some "*pshetel*." The reader did not care to know what A. or B. said upon any specific topic, but he strove to discover some real or apparent contradiction in their statements, which he could then proceed to reconcile. For to the authors of this period, as Prof. Schechter says, the preceding Jewish literature did not mean a fountain of living waters, supplying men with truth and religious inspiration, but rather a kind of armory providing them with juristic cases over which to fight, and to out-do each other in sophistry and subtlety.

Elijah was the first to check this mischief. He introduced the most searching critical methods in the study of the Talmud, and thus elevated it to a science. His corrections and emendations were neither mere guess-work nor artificial structures, but such as were justified and often even necessitated by a comparison of texts and original sources. He required his disciples to study the Talmud in such a way as to be able to analyse each tractate, to know in each dis-

cussion who were the Tanaim and Amoraim mentioned therein, and what each of these rabbis stood for.

Common sense was with him the *conditio sine qua non* in all studies (8). He was the first to recognize—Geiger pointed it out after him—that just as there are two modes of explaining the Bible, *derash* and *peshat*, so are there two corresponding methods in the explanation of the Mishnah. In order, therefore, to understand the Mishnah properly, we must not accept the comments of the Amoraim upon it, but we must interpret it literally and independently of the Gemara (9). But Elijah would not have any one study the Talmud unless he had first carefully studied the Bible. With him, in fact, the careful and grammatical study of the Bible always took the first place among the studies. The other scholars of that time neglected the Bible altogether (10). They religiously studied the Talmud, Code, and the Com-

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(8). Cf., the Gaon's Commentary to Proverbs, xi:5.

(9). Bernfeld, "Toldoth Hareformation Hadosith" (p. 115), Cracow, 1900.

(10). Cf., *Yore Deah*, 245:76.

mentaries, but all they knew of the Bible they obtained indirectly through the Talmud. So generally was this the case, that it has been shown that out of a hundred scholars scarcely one knew the date of Aaron's death, which is expressly given in the Bible (11), while everyone of them knew that Moses died on the seventh day of Adar, which is merely a guess of the Talmud (12). Such a method the Gaon opposed. Raphael Hamburger, when asked wherein lay the greatness of the Gaon, pointed to the Bible, saying that the knowledge of that book and the revival of Jewish interest in it, is to a large extent due to him. Instead of familiarizing himself with the Bible through the numerous quotations from it in the Talmud, he, unlike the other Talmudists of the time, attained to the knowledge of it by reading the Bible itself. In his later days, we are informed by David Lurie (13), he studied nothing but the Pentateuch, inserting, as he read, the various Talmudical interpretations and

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(11). Numbers xxxiii:38.

(12). *Kiddushin*, 38b.

(13). *Ma'aloth Hasulom*, 29.

later rabbinical views; a thing which was possible for him to do, as he was thoroughly familiar both with the Bible and the whole rabbinical literature (14).

Having revived interest in the Bible, he also restored the long-neglectd study of Hebrew grammar (15), on which subject he wrote a book. He likewise created an interest in the Tosephto, the Michilto, Siphri, and Siphro, and also in the Palestinian Talmud, which he corrected and clarified. In all of his commentaries, and he wrote one on almost every book of the Bible, he lays great stress on the true and grammatical understanding of the text. He submitted all sacred literature to the same philological method of study which is applied to secular literature. With a single reference to a parallel passage, or with a textual emendation, he very often tears down the air-castles of his predecessors. His thorough acquaintance with the various branches of

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(14). In the Bible he could, according to Lurie, enumerate all the "vav's" and "yods" of each chapter.

(15). Neglected, no doubt, partly in opposition to the over-emphasis on this subject by the Karaites.

Jewish literature made it possible for him to explain a great many obscure and difficult passages in the Bible and Talmud. He sought to elucidate obscure passages in the Mishnah by citing parallel passages from the Tosephtho. The difficult passages in the Babylonian Talmud he tried to explain by reference to the corresponding older and simpler passages in the Palestinian Talmud.

The Gaon's attitude to Kabbalah is hard to define. Graetz finds fault with him because he believed in such Kabbalistic works as the Zohar, etc. But if we consider the conditions of the time, we shall be apt to criticise him less severely for his leanings towards Kabbalah. This much at any rate is certain, that though he did not reject Kabbalah, and even wrote a commentary on the Zohar, he was not influenced by it as were his contemporaries. He did, indeed, accept the good side of its teachings, namely, to shun worldly and sensuous pleasures; but aside from this, the Talmud alone was his guide (16). That he wrote

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(16). Cf., Cahan, "*Eben Ophel*," and "*Hashchachar*," vol. V (1874), pp. 639-643.

a commentary on the Zohar does not argue anything in regard to his attitude towards its teachings; for he did not expect his writings to be published. His works were originally merely notes to his readings. These "jottings" were later found so valuable and complete as to warrant their publication in a more permanent form. But we may not conclude from this that he accepted the teachings of the books upon which he commented, any more than we could conclude in the case of a modern Jewish scholar that he accepted Christianity because he had made some glosses to a New Testament text. We have other proof, too, if the testimony of an opponent may be relied upon, that he did not have any strong leanings towards Kabbalah. A letter (17) of one of the Chassidic saints, Shneur Solomon, contains the following reference to the Gaon:

הנה עיקר לא נזכר אלא בקבלה האריז"ל  
לבדה ולא במקובלים שלפנינו נם לא  
בזהו הך קרווש בפירוש. ווידוע לי בבירור  
גמור שהנואן הנ"ל אינו מאמין בקבלה

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(17). In a Chassidic MS., now in the possession of Ephraim Deinard.

האריז"ל בכללה שתיא כליה מפי אליו ז"ל, רק מעט מזער מפי אליו ז"ל, והשאר מחכמתו הנדרלה ואינו מחויב בה להאמינו, וنم הספרים נשתבשו מأد (לדעת הנר"א) ולאיש אשר אלה לו ואיש לו משפט היבורה לבחור הטוב והישר בכל כתבי קודש הקדשים האריז"ל לומר שמוועה זו נאה... מה נאמר ומה נדבר ומה נצדרק לפנינו.

But whatever may have been his attitude towards Kabbalah, it was beyond question more favorable towards Haskalah. In Lithuania, at least, he was the precursor of modern Haskalah and of Biblical criticism; though this has been contested by such writers, for instance, as Mr. N. S. Libovitz, who wrote as he did (18) not so much because he found any fault with the Gaon—a thing which according to some enthusiastic admirers, at least, would be utterly impossible (19)—but because he wished to oppose Isaac Hirsch Weiss, who called Elijah „אבי החכמה“. The arguments brought forward in the *אגרת בקרת* are so puerile as hardly to require any refutation. As though it made any differ-

(18). In *Igereth Bikoreth*, pp. 15, 16.

(19). Smolensky, in "Hashachar." vol. VI. (1875), p. 98.

ence whether the Gaon intended by his method of criticism to pave the way for the labors of modern exegetes, or whether he merely desired to have a corrected text. As though it mattered, in this connection, whether he desired his disciples to translate secular books into Hebrew in order to promote the study of the sciences, or because he hoped thereby to benefit the cause of Jewish learning. The fact remains, that, far from despising the sciences as did the other Talmudists of his time, he studied them, and even wrote works on geometry, algebra and mathematical astronomy. Not only, he held, would the sciences not harm the cause of Judaism, but they could and must greatly benefit it. Hence he made a liberal education mandatory on the Jewish student. For, he said, where one fails to understand one thing in the secular sciences he falls short of the true knowledge of a hundred things in the sacred law. As a result of this view, his disciples took up the study of the sciences with great zeal. (20.)

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(20). Levinson, I. B., *Te'udoth Beyisroel*, p. 147, Warsaw, 1879.

ובכן היו חכמים ובקאים בדקדוק ובהנדסה  
ויתר הוכחות הנצרכות לתוכהו כל  
החברוא קדישא תלמידיו מהר"א ז"ל.

Having himself written on various topics  
of secular interest, he urged upon his dis-  
ciples the necessity of translating works of  
secular science into Hebrew. (21.)

והנה בהיותי בק"ק ווילנא המעתירה אצל  
הרבי המאור הנאון נדול מוש' מאור עיני  
הגוללה החסיד המפלורסם כמוות ר' אליהו  
גר"ו בחודש טבת תקל"ח שמעתי מפי  
קדוש כי כפי מה שיחסר לאדם ידיעות  
משאריו הוכחות לעומת זה יחסר לו מאות  
ירות בחכמת התורה וההוכמה נצמדים  
ו ר... וצוה לי להעתיק מה שאפשר  
ללשונו הקהוישת מוכחות כדי להוציא  
בולם מפיהם וישוטטו רבים ותרבה  
הדעת בין עמנו ישראל ותוסר גאון עוזם  
זגאות עזיצים המון עמים ולשון לאומים  
אשר בשאון מום רבם ישאון לעמתיינו  
אייפה חכמתכם ונמצא שם שמים מתחלל

Elijah's attitude towards philosophy was  
a very favorable one. The famous note  
often referred to in connection with his  
biography, in which he is made to say that  
Maimonides was misled by cursed philoso-

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(21). Baruch of Sklov, Introduction to Euclid, Hague, 1780. Cf., also the preface of Abraham Simchah, of Amzislow, to Shulman's "Milchamoth Hanehudim." Wilna, 1884.

phy is surely an interpolation by a later hand, as will be shown in a later chapter, when we come to treat of his works (22). Not only did he make a thorough study of philosophy, but he often quotes the "More" approvingly (23). Once the complaint was made to him that the "dayan" of Wilna, Judah Ashkenazi, recited the "More" daily before his disciples, and he was urged to prohibit this practice. But he exclaimed in indignation (24):

הרבינו משה יורה ואני אפיך? מי יתנו חלקי עמו.

And it is but natural that Elijah should have favored philosophy, for, as Schechter points out, he represented truth both in his literary activity, and in his life, which was one unceasing longing and effort after truth. Not only was he content, on the physical side, with a mere sustenance of life in this world, but he lived uprightly apart from any consideration of the hereafter. When asked for his views on the

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(22). Chapter VI.

(23). Cf., Jawitz, *Keneseth Yisroel*, 1886. Also Introduction to *Peath Hashulchan*, Safed, 1836.

(24). Fuenn, *Kiryah, Ne'emanah*, pp. 152 and 280.

doctrine of reward in the next world he would say (25):

אליהו יכול לעמוד לאלהים נם בלי עולם  
הבא.

Only that, he would frequently say to his disciples, was of any value, which has been acquired by one's own hard labor. If an angel, he said, were sent to teach him the mysteries of the Law, he would not accept his services. We are told in the name of his disciple, R. Chaim, of Volozhin (26), that on a certain occasion the Gaon did not eat for three days because he was occupied in trying to unravel the mysteries of a very difficult passage, and it was only after he had found some clue to the meaning that he partook of food.

So advanced and liberal was he in his views, that, almost three quarters of a century before the practice of uncovering the head was introduced into the synagogue in Germany, he held that bareheadedness was no sin, even during prayer, but that custom did not sanction it. In view of the fact

(25). Brainin, *Mimizrach Umima'arob*, vol. IV., 1899.

(26). *Aliath Eliohu*, p. 33.

that his contemporaries regarded bare-headedness during prayer as almost equivalent to the violation of one of the Ten Commandments, only as great a man as the Gaon could permit himself to be so outspoken in his views. His saint-like life, his great fame, and his universally acknowledged piety, saved him from the charge of heresy.

But the Gaon disregarded not only the prejudices of his own time, but those of all times. He could not tolerate dishonesty and falsehood, no matter where found. Thus, for instance, in commenting on the decision of the *Yore Deah* that the superstitious custom of slaughtering any hen that crows like a cock may be kept up, but that this must not be the reason given for the slaughtering, he exclaims: (27): considered it a happy event in one's life to have conversed with him, or to have

דבריו קשים בחומר לשניהם וכעשן לעניהם  
לגנוב דעת המקומות.

No wonder, then, that the people of Wilna revered such a man as a saint, and

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(27). Cf., the commentary on *Yore Deah*, 179:8.

been of any service to him. No wonder that all the scholars of his time recognized him as their master. It seems as if nature had bestowed all her gifts upon that one man. Besides possessing the other qualities referred to above, he was endowed with a remarkable memory which can scarcely find its equal. After having read a book once, he was able to recite its contents from memory the rest of his life. His keen insight and quick and sure grasp were still more marvelous. The most complicated passages in Talmudic literature, over which other scholars had to pore for days before they could understand them, he was able to read at a glance. He was once shown one of the inexplicable midrashim which read as follows:

אין מניחין תפין אלא בשבת

and without any hesitation he explained it to mean:

„במקומות שער, במקומות תפוח“

(which are indeed the right places for the "tephilin"). When Eibenschuetz's *Urim Vetumim* appeared, one of the Gaon's disciples, who had a strong inclination towards pilpulism, found delight in studying it, and

often praised the work of the Gaon. One day Elijah asked him to select what he thought the most subtle discourse in the book, and recite it. The disciple chose a very long and intricate discussion which he repeated to his teacher. When he had finished, Elijah said to him: "If we wished to engage in such worthless work, life would be much too short to accomplish anything, for in this same argument we could add"—and here the Gaon prolonged the discussion so much, and in so skillful a manner, that his hearer could scarcely follow it.

R. Loeb, the author of **שאנת אריה**, once delivered a pilpulistic lecture which was very much admired by the scholars of Wilna. On the following day the Gaon delivered one in which he proved that leaven was permitted on the Passover. After he had finished, his hearers crowded around him, overwhelming him with questions as to whether the laws regarding **דמאי** ought to be abolished. He then opened the Bible and pointed to the express command (28) (א תאכל עליו חמץ).

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(28). Deut. xvi:3.

adding: This is the truth of the matter, the other was fiction.

Herr Schulman, of Buechow, once visited the Gaon. After he had introduced himself, the Gaon asked him—he was a grammarian of great renown—whether he could take some mishnaic passage and vocalize it. Schulman not being able to do this, was asked to select a passage for the purpose of testing the Gaon in a similar way, and the Gaon without hesitation correctly vocalized the text thus chosen for him (29).

His disciple, R. Chayim, once asked him why, in addition to the ordinary phylacteries, he did not don the "*tephilin*" of Rabbenu Tam in order to be on the safe side. If this were necessary, said Elijah, why not have sixty-four different kinds of "*tephilin*," since there are that many different views in the Talmud as to the proper method of making them?

In his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch he often shows a better knowledge of the sources of the various religious practices than does Joseph Caro himself; and in his notes and textual criticisms on the

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(29). *Ben Poroth*, p. 67, Wilna, 1858.

Tosephto and the Seder Olam he restores the correct texts more frequently than do those who were able to avail themselves of the MSS.

These are but a few illustrations of the phenomenal powers of the Gaon. Many more might be cited to show that in him were found, in rare combination, those qualities of mind and heart which constitute what we know as genius. And well for Lithuania that such a master came at a time when he was most needed.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE GAON'S OPPOSITION TO CHASSIDISM.

PILPULISM was not the only source of mischief for the Jews of the Gaon's time. A far greater evil was now rapidly spreading, which threatened to gain a powerful hold upon the Jew of Lithuania—namely, Chassidism.

Just how this movement originated is not known. It could not have been, as has been suggested by some (30), a revolt against the excessive casuistry of the contemporary rabbis; nor could its origin have been due to the extreme rigorism of the Talmudists. In either case, as has been pointed out by Mr. Ephraim Deinard (31), we should expect Chassidism to have had its rise in Lithuania, where casuistic pil-pulism and extreme rigorism had their greatest development; and not in the wild ravines of Wallachia, or the dreary steppes of Ukraine, territories of mental and

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(30). *E. g.*, Graetz and Schechter.

(31). In *Kitoth Beyisroel*, pp. 1-12, New York, 1899; also *Zemir 'Arizim*, pp. 6-26, Newark, N. J., 1899.

spiritual darkness, where the Talmud was unknown and the study of the law entirely neglected. Nor do we know who was the founder of the sect. For, although *Besht* be "the center of the Chassidic world, and Chassidism so intimately bound up with his personality that any separation between them is well nigh impossible," it is difficult to believe that he was the founder of the sect (32). Not only is there no mention of his name in the writings of the early opponents of Chassidism, but even the Chassidic writers of his time do not say anything about him. The book "*Zavoath Ba'al Shem*" is a work of very recent origin. In the "*Zemir Orizim*," which was written only twelve years after the appearance of Chassidism in Lithuania, the name *Besht* which was published anonymously in the year 1810 at Berditchef, is evidently the work of either an ironic or fanatical writer. This absence of *Besht's* name in the Chassidic literature is so much more curious does not occur. The "*Shevoche Besht*,"

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(32). For the legends about *Besht* (a parallel to those about Christ), Cf. Prof. Schechter's Studies in Judaism, pp. 1-45.

for the Chassidim, in order to be able to produce all their works unhindered by their opponents, established printing shops in many towns and villages (33), so that whatever came from the pen of a Chassidic writer was immediately published.

The most plausible supposition seems to be that Chassidism was an outgrowth of the Sabbathai-Zevi and Frank sects, and that it assumed its present form under Nachman of Braslow (1772-1811), the grandson of *Besht*. This Nachman was a man of considerable knowledge, but very vain and greedy, and therefore instituted the idolatrous cult of "Zaddik" worship. The teachings laid down by him are so repulsive that it requires much patience and strength of will to read beyond the first few paragraphs (34). In the main they deal with the worship of the "Zaddik," "a being who can be comprehended as little as an angel or as God himself; he is realized

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(33). Mr. Deinard enumerates 34 printing establishments of this kind, while outside of these there were only 5 Jewish establishments in all Lithuania and Poland.

(34). See *Likute Muran*, arranged by Nathan ben Abraham Herz, Astrog & Mohileff, 1808 and 1811.

by faith, not conceived by thought." The use of medicine is prohibited, as the "Zaddik" can heal by prayer. Studying is also prohibited, as the possession of wisdom is the exclusive privilege of the "Zaddik," all Chassidim must confess to the "Zaddik" all their sins, and even after his death they must not cease to worship him. In his will he orders the faithful ones to pray on his grave when he is dead, so that their sins might be forgiven. (35).

ווער עס ווועט קומען אויף מיין קבר  
מתפלל זיין ווועל איך איהם פאָר די פאות  
אַרְוּוִים שְׁלַעַפְעָן פּוֹן גַּוְהָנָם.

While eating, drinking, and sleeping, and the other ordinary functions of the body are regarded by the older Jewish moralists as means to an end, they become for the Chassidim direct services of God; hence the excessive eating and drinking, and the loose morals of the Chassidim. Immorality was especially bound to flourish, for, basing on the theory which denies the freedom of the will, they held that no impulse, coming as it does from God, should be resisted. (36).

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(35). Deinard, *Kitoth Beyisroel*, p. 6.

(36). *Likute Muran*.

שמעתי מ' מא' א"ז זלה"ה שהשכינה היא  
כעילא לתחטא, עד סוף כל המדרגות, וזהו  
סוד אתה מוחיה את כלם שאפילו בשהadm  
עובר עבירה חלייה, אווי ג"כ השכינה  
מתלבשת בו, כי בלהה ובלעדיה לא היה  
בוי כח להניע שום אבר ואפילו ביהود של  
נאות וشكර, הוא יתברך מוחיה אותו  
שעה ונונתן בו כה.

Though some of our modern writers in  
their desire for that which is novel endeavor  
to find a good side in Chassidism and to present  
it in a favorable light, no one will deny  
that the sect aimed at abolishing, or at least  
at diminishing study of every kind, that it  
created an idolatrous worship of the  
“*Zaddik*,” and that it practised a cult which  
was un-Jewish. That the Chassidim “were  
second to no other sect in their loyalty and  
affection for one another,” is but natural.  
A small group of people who are per-  
secuted in the same cause must necessarily  
be drawn into a closer union with each  
other.

As long as the sect confined itself to the  
remote and insignificant villages of the  
Ukraine, and the other dark parts of Rus-  
sia, its un-Jewish cult could be practiced  
with impunity. Later, however, when in

consequence of the Cossack persecution, many emigrated and came as far as Lithuania, the Talmudists rose in indignation against the new sect. Wilna, as the most important Jewish center of Lithuania, was the first to declare war upon it. It was evident, however, that unless the Gaon, who was at that time admired and revered by every Jewish scholar in Europe, sanctioned the proceedings against the Chassidim, their mischievous practices could not be checked. Hence when the rabbis met in Wilna, in 1777, and agreed to pronounce the "cherem" against the Chassidim, the Gaon was asked to give his approval to it. Contrary to his usual practice of abstaining from any participation in controversies, he signed the document of excommunication, attaching thereto the following comment (37):

ואף שאין מדרכי לצאת חוץ מגדרי  
עכ"ז לעת הפרו תורה עת לעשות וכו'  
לכן גם אנחנו אבוא על החותם יומם כ"ד  
מנחם תקמ"א לפ"ק, נאם אליו  
במושר"ז וצלה"ה.

After the "ban" had been signed by Elijah, a mass-meeting was held in the Grand

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(37). Fuenn, *Kiryah Ne'emanah*, p. 138.

Synagogue, a thousand lights were lighted, the shofar blown, and the excommunication read from the pulpit. After the "*cherem*" had been read in Wilna and also at the fair in Zelva, where merchants gathered yearly from all parts of Russia, Solomon of Ladi, perhaps the most important of the Chassidim, wished to have an interview with the Gaon, but was not admitted by the latter, who feared that such an interview was calculated to lead the people to believe that he had turned in favor of Chassidism—a belief which actually became current a little later through the trickery of the Chassidim.

The Gaon's peace-loving disposition did not allow him to persevere in the persecution of the Chassidim. After signing the excommunication he desisted from further participating in the controversy. Meanwhile the Chassidim, resorting to a trick, gave rise to the impression that the Gaon had been won over to their cause. A blind man was sent by them to various cities, accompanied by a boy who introduced him as the son of Elijah of Wilna.

In reply to inquiries about his father's attitude towards Chassidism he would state that Elijah had recanted, and that advanced age alone prevented him from doing penance and traveling in person to preach the Chassidic doctrines. At first this trick was effective, for many, taking the silence of the Gaon for consent, joined the new sect. But when this came to the ears of the Gaon the imposter had been discovered at Hamburg by a Lithuanian merchant—he sent, in 1796, two of his disciples, Chayim, of Serhey, and Sa'adiah, to all the principal communities of Russia, to denounce the detestable sect in a new decree of excommunication (38). This time the decree had the desired effect, for the spread of Chassidism was checked, and even after the death of the Gaon the influence of his memory was powerful enough to keep many from joining this movement.

Besides this participation in the controversies against Chassidism, Elijah seems also to have taken part against N. H. Wessely (though none of his biographers state

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(38). Deinard's *Kitoth Beyisroel* (pp. 13-25) gives the circular letters.

this) (39). The latter, born in 1725 in Hamburg, distinguished himself through his Talmudical knowledge and secular education. He was at first manager of Joseph Veitel's large banking-house at Amsterdam; then he went to Copenhagen, where he established a bank of his own. Having lost all his money there, he went to Berlin in 1774 and became again the manager of one of Veitel's banks. Two years later Veitel gave up his business and Wessely was left without a position. After months of suffering and privation, he was invited by Moses Mendelssohn, who had entered into intimate friendship with him, to assist in preparing the forthcoming translation and commentary to the Pentateuch, which invitation Wessely gladly accepted. In 1781 the commentary on Leviticus, the work of Wessely, appeared, and the scholars were loud in its praise (40).

Soon, however, he drew the enmity and

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(39). See Guedemann and Graetz in *Monatsschrift*, vol. XIX, pp. 478-480, and, vol. XX, pp. 465-469.

(40). *Vide* Kayserling, Moses Mendelssohn, chap. XXIV, Leipzig, 1888.

persecution of the rabbis upon himself. The cause of this was a pamphlet, "Words of Peace and Truth," in which he urged the people of Austria to establish schools in accordance with an edict of Joseph II. He praised the king highly and emphasized, even too strongly perhaps, the necessity of secular knowledge. The pious rabbis of the time saw in this an admonition to neglect the study of the Talmud and took up their weapons against him. Among those who entered the lists against Wessely were Ezekiel Landau of Prague, Pinchas Horwitz of Frankfort-on-the-Main, and the three whom he mentions expressly in one of his letters, namely, Joseph Zaddik, of Posen, the son-in-law of Landau, David Teweile of Lissa, and Elijah of Wilna.

That the Gaon should have taken part against Wessely may appear strange. Yet when we consider how much Mendelssohn's well-meant efforts to spread secular knowledge contributed to the neglect of the study of the Law and to the making of converts to Christianity, we can better appreciate Elijah's motives in giving his consent to

the burning of Wessely's "*Divre Shalom Ve'emet*."

But of greater value even than the Gaon's efforts against evil tendencies in Judaism were his more lasting constructive activities. But for his labors Lithuania, like the greater part of Poland, would have fallen a prey to Chassidism, and would have sunk to the level of Podolia and Wolhynia, where this cult has produced utter ignorance and degradation. We are chiefly indebted to him, however, for his intellectual and spiritual descendants, that long line of scholars and "*maskilim*" who arose in Lithuania during the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE GAON'S DISCIPLES.

WHAT would have become of Judaism and Jewish literature in Lithuania if the Gaon had not so strenuously opposed the Chassidic movement is not difficult to understand. In all the Chassidic districts there is not a single rabbi who has distinguished himself in any noteworthy manner, whereas almost every Lithuanian rabbi has done good work of some sort. In all the Chassidic strongholds there is not one "yeshibah," not a single "beth-ha-Midrash" where the Talmud is studied, whereas every city of Lithuania has a "yeshibah" and a more or less numerous class of Talmudic students (41).

Realizing that through mere opposition neither pilpulism nor Chassidism could be overthrown, the Gaon founded in 1780 a school in which he taught a large number of disciples according to his own advanced method; and it was this school and those patterned after it that produced the great

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(41). Cf., *Yazkan*, pp. 103-104.

Russian Talmudists of the nineteenth century (42).

On the site of this "beth-ha-Midrash" a grand edifice was erected after the Gaon's death. A large marble tablet bears the following inscription:

לבד זה ראיינו  
מצאנו צדיק תמים, בדורות אחים  
שמעו הולך בכל أيام ומדינה, חכמו  
בחוץ, לספר שבחו נבער כל אדם מ דעת,  
בנה בנית לך עליות מרוחות, שוש תשיש  
באה' שבע שמחות, זה שבתו הבית הזה  
ארבעים שנה, למד כל דבר חכמת בינה,  
עוד לימד את העם דעת בחיבוריו על  
מקרא, משנה, תלמוד בבלי, ירושלמי,  
ואננות, הלכות, דבריו בכוכבים לעד  
יאור, פרושים כזהר הרקיע יזהיר, יום  
לימים וליליה ליליה יחוו דעת על זהה,  
ותיקונים היכלות, וס' יצירה, רעה  
מהימנא, מעשה בראשית, מעשה מרכבה,  
הוויות דאבי ורבא, לעם גבורותיו  
יתבוננו היכהיהם, ענן כי שם נגלו אליו  
האללים, הלא הוא הדעת, זכרו לא יסוף  
מקהיל ועדת, בחיבוריו ישוטטו רביהם  
وترבה הדעת.

Shortly after the Gaon's death the influence of his school and of his teaching began to make itself felt not only through-

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(42). Cf., Fuenn, *Kiryah Ne'emanah*, 274.  
276.

out Russia but also in Palestine. Seats of learning were founded and his disciples continued the work of the master. It is worthy of remark, in this connection, that some of our Jewish historians show a wonderful faculty for shutting their eyes to facts when treating of Jewish scholarship in Russia. Thus one of them says in speaking of the Gaon: "*Ein so feiner und klarer Geist sollte man meinen haette auf dieselben (seine Glaubensgenossen) einen gedeihlichen Einfluss ausueben und sie in eine neue Richtung fuehren muessen! Weit gefehlt: Elia Wilna blieb eine vereinzelte Erscheinung in seinem Lande und in seiner Zeit, dem man wegen seiner Froemigkeit huldigte, dem nachzufolgen jedoch keiner seiner Juenger und Genossen auch nur den schuechternen Versuch machte*" (43). We have only to examine the list of his disciples to see that the shining traces of this great light are not and will never be dimmed. His followers have implanted in the Russian Jew a desire for sincere and

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(43). G. Karpeles, *Geschichte der Juedischen Literatur*, vol. II., pp. 979-980, Berlin, 1886.

methodical study of Biblical and rabbinical literature, as well as an appreciation of secular learning. All the Russian scholars of the last century considered themselves the Gaon's pupils, and as such they all strove to work in his spirit. The best work, however, has been done by his immediate disciples, among whom the foremost place is occupied by Chayim of Volozhin. He did more than any other scholar of his time to carry out the principles of Elijah.

Born in 1749 in Volozhin, this R. Chayim occupied no official post in the community, but was engaged in business. Nevertheless, he came to enjoy great renown as a scholar. In 1774 he gave up his prosperous business and went to Wilna to study under the great master. All his former scholarly achievements notwithstanding, he desired to begin anew, for even the most elementary studies took on a high meaning under the guidance and instruction of the Gaon. After studying Hebrew grammar, the Bible, and Mishnah, he plunged under the care of his master into the Deep of the Talmud. When

the Gaon had become advanced in years he entrusted to Chayim the task of establishing a Talmudic academy in which rabbinical literature should be studied according to his own scientific method. Five years after the death of Elijah, R. Chayim carried out the wish of his master and established in Volozhin the "*Yeshibath Ez-Chayim*." At first only a few pupils came, but in a short time the "*yeshibah*" became widely known through the sincerity and zeal of R. Chayim (44), and men from all parts of the country came to taste of the "Tree of Life." At the time of R. Chayim's death, in 1828, the "*yeshibah*" numbered one hundred students, and up to the time it was closed (some twelve years ago) the number had increased to five hundred (45). Upon the opening of the '*yeshibah*' the founder writes in a circular letter:

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(44). So zealous was he in his work that on one occasion when a number of new students arrived and no means could be found for their sustenance, he sold some of his own clothing and his wife's jewels in order to support the poor "*bachurim*."

(45). Cf., M. Hurwitz, *Derech Ez-Hachayim* (Cracow, 1895), for the history of the *Yeshibah*.

ואנבי' שמעתי שנקרא עלי שם רבינו  
 הנזול מרבן שמו בכל תפוצות ישראל  
 מראנו ורבנה קדוש ישראל ואורו הגאון  
 מוהר"ר אליהו נ"ע חסיד מווילנא, זכית  
 להקרא עלי שמו הטוב, שאני תלמידו  
 ראייתי חובה לעצמי להודיע בישראל  
 נאמנה שחילקה לי לפגום בכבוד הרב  
 רבינו הנadol והקדוש נ"ע להקרא שמו  
 עלי, וכו'. ואיך אישים פני בחלמייש ולא  
 אבוש להקרא בשם תלמידו אחר אשר  
 לא זכיתי לקבל מהודו אפילו מקטחו...  
 ובקצת הימים אשר זכיתי לשמש אותו  
 לא זכיתי ממנו אלא לידע צורתה  
 דשמעתא אחר היגיעת... ונם ליניעת  
 רבינו הנadol לא זכיתי, כי לא יושן ולא  
 יסופר ולא יאומן גודל רבינו הנadol נ"ע  
 למי שלא ראה גודל יגיעהו על כל דקדוק  
 וקידוק מן התורה עד שעמד להשגה על  
 בוריה.

Of the many other disciples who helped to spread the ideas of the Gaon we might mention his son and pupil, Abraham, who was the pioneer of historical and critical research in the field of Jewish homiletics. His work on that subject, "*Rab Po'olim*" (Wilna, 1802), according to some, guided Zunz in the composition of his "*Gottes-*

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(46). Cf., Kaufmann, in *Monatschrift*, vol. XXXIX, pp. 136-139.

*dienstliche Vortraege*" (46). The most prominent among the rest are:

The brother of R. Chayim, Solomon of Volozhin, whom the Gaon liked especially for his wonderful memory and keen intellect (47).

R. Solomon of Wilkomir, one of the most frequent visitors of the Gaon.

R. Moses Solomon, the rabbi of Wilna who studied Kabbalah under Elijah.

Hirsh of Simititz, known as the Chassid of Simititz and author of "*Margoloth Ha-torah*."

Solomon of Mohileff, who established a Talmudical academy in that city, and devoted the greater part of his life to the dissemination of knowledge among the poorer classes.

Benjamin of Sklov, a physician who had given up a splendid practice in order to study under the Gaon (48).

Baruch Bendit of Sklov and his two sons, Simchah and Mendel.

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(47). See *Margoloth, Aze Eden*, p. 16a; also his biography by Ezekiel Feivel, Dyhernfurth, 1801.

(48). Cf., Fuenn, *Kiryah Ne'emanah*, 277-79.

Solomon of Tlotshin, who had been a devout student of the Kabbalah, but abandoned it to follow the teachings of the Gaon.

Meir of Wilna, editor of the Gaon's commentary on Mishnah "*Taharoth*."

Israel Sklov, author of "*Peath Hashulchan*"; Chayim of Tubiah; and Sa'adiah; who together founded the famous yeshibah at Safed and in several other cities in Palestine (49).

Besides these and the contemporary rabbis and "*dayanim*" of Wilna, two more of his most active disciples remain to be mentioned. They are Joshua von Zeitelin and Menasseh of Illyi. The former was Privy Councillor to Queen Catherine II. and a very intimate friend of her Prime Minister Potemkin. He did more than any other of the disciples to further secular education. He was very influential, and his piety and scholarship were as great as his influence. Not only did he try to promote education himself—which he was able to do owing to his high position—but he

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(49). *Vide, Lunez, Jerusalem, Vol. I.*  
(1882).

also brought together a body of Jewish scholars, physicians, and scientists, and established a sort of university on his estate in Usczia, near Mohileff. Here every meritorious student found not only an opportunity to develop his talents, with the aid of a large library, a clinic, botanical and zoological museums, chemical laboratories, and the other equipments of a good university of that day, but he also received a very liberal support.

Menassee of Illyi, one of the profoundest Hebrew scholars of his time and an idealist of the purest type, bent all the energies of his pure soul and lofty mind to bring the thoughts and methods of his master, the Gaon, into practical use. So great was his desire to propagate general culture among his brethren that he even adopted the Judeo-German dialect for literary purposes and translated into it his "Sama *Dechaye*," a work on religious and social ethics which he had written in Hebrew.

But while striving for secular knowledge, the Gaon's disciples never lost sight of the principal aim of their teacher, namely, to rid the rabbinical law of the dialectical cob-

webs that had accumulated about it. Having become the leaders at the greatest seats of rabbinical learning, they followed with great assiduity the Gaon's critical methods. Learned works on religious subjects, ignoring and even controverting the decisions arrived at by the dialecticians of previous generations, appeared in great numbers. Bible commentators made it their object to explain the sacred texts strictly according to the rules of grammar and to expound their literary beauty, rather than to force traditional meanings and popular religious notions into them, as had been done by the commentators of previous times. Under the disciples of Elijah Jewish life in Russia, religious and social, assumed a brighter aspect, and the combined activities of these scholars brought about the epoch of "*Haskalah*."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE GAON'S WORKS.

THE Gaon's works are very numerous and valuable. Up to his fortieth year he was accustomed to write them out himself; from that time on his thoughts would come to him so rapidly that he could scarcely jot them down, which made it necessary for him to dictate them to his disciples. In these works, numbering as they do about seventy volumes, there seem to be clear indications of passages added and removed by other hands. For example, in the introduction to his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch his sons do not tell us that he expressed a desire to see scientific works translated into Hebrew; a fact which cannot be doubted, however, as his disciple, Baruch of Sklov, published the letter quoted in the third chapter of this work in 1780, during the life-time of the Gaon. On the other hand, a clear case of interpolation is the passage in his commentary on Yore Deah, 179:13, in connection with the statement that witchcraft is powerless.

הרמב"ם כ"כ בפי' המשנה לפ"ד

דעתו רוכבים אבל כל הבאים אחריו

חילקו עליו שהרי הרבה לחשים נאמרו

בגנרא והוא נmisך אהרי הפלוסופיא הארורה. ולכן ב' שכשפים ושות ולחשים ושדים וקמיעות הכל הוא שקר. אבל כבר הכו אותו על קדרו שהרי מצינו הרבה מעשיות בגמ' וכו' וזהר שם וכן קמיעין בהרבה מקומות ולחשים רבים מלספר. והפלוסופיא הטעו ברוב לפקחה לפרש הגמרא הכל בדרך הלא זיהוי ולעקר אוטם מפשטן וח"ו איני מאמין בהם ולא מהמון אלא כל הדברים הם כפשטן אלא שיש בהם פנימיות, לא פנימיות של בעלי הפלוסופיא שהם חזניות אלא של בעלי האמת.

That this passage is an interpolation can admit of no dispute. Not only did his disciples consider it a gloss (51), but its verbosity and the frequent repetitions it contains prove that it could not have come from the hand of the Gaon, whose style is so terse as often to make his meaning obscure (52). Besides, its spirit is out of harmony with that of the Gaon's entire system. Not only his disciples, but even his opponents said of him that he favored philosophy (53).

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(51). See *Kiryah Neemanah*, p. 152.

(52). Cf., Ben Abraham, *Achiasaf*, 1898-1899.

(53). Shne'ur Solomon, *Introduction to Mezaref Hoavodah*, Koenigsberg, 1858.

אמיצאותן ואמיצאותן וערבה לפני  
בשפטנו להסיר מעלינו את כל תלונותינו  
זענותינו הפלוסופיא אשר הדר  
בקבותיהם לפני דבריהם תלמידיו לחקור  
אלחות בכל אנושי.

His works, as enumerated in the Jewish Encyclopedia (Vol. V, article Elijah ben Solomon), are the following:

*Biblical.*

*Aderet Eliyahu*, a commentary on the Pentateuch, in which he endeavored to give the exact meaning of the verses, showing that there is not a single letter too much, Dubrovna, 1804.

Commentary to the Prophets and Hagiographa. The only parts published were Proverbs (Sklov, 1798); the portion of Joshua containing the description of Palestine and that of Ezekiel containing the description of the Temple, under the title of "Zurat ha-Arez" (ib. 1802); Jonah (Wilna, 1800); Isaiah-xiii; Habakkuk and Chronicles (ib. 1820); the Song of Songs (Warsaw, 1842); and Job i-viii. (ib. 1854).

*Talmudic.*

*Shenot Eliyahu*, long and short commentaries on *Zera'im*, revised by his pupil Haylim of Volozhin. Lemberg, 1799.

*Eliyahu Rabbah*, on *Tohorot*, compiled

by his pupil Meir of Wilna. Bruenn, 1802.

Commentary on *Kedoshim* and a mystical commentary on the Biblical passages quoted in the Mishnah, both extant in manuscript.

*Efat Zedek*, glosses to the *Mekilta*. Wilna, 1844.

Commentary and glosses to the *Sifra*.

Glosses to the *Sifre*.

*Tohorot ha-Kodesh* (also called "Zer Zohab"), commentary on *Tosef.*, *Tohorot*. Zolkiev, 1804.

Glosses to *Tosof.*, *Zera'im*, *Mo'ed*, and *Nashim*. Wilna, 1837.

*Yerushalmi*.

Commentary on the order *Zera'im*. *Mishnah Eliyahu*, glosses to the treatise *Shekinah*, printed in the "Taklin Hadtin" of his pupil, Israel of Sklov, Minsk, 1812.

*Babli*.

*Hagahot ha-Gera* (ha-Gaon Rabbeinu Eliyahu), being a selection from glosses to the whole Talmud written by Elijah; published in the edition of the Talmud. Vienna, 1806.

Glosses to *Abot de-Rabbi Natan* and to the small treatises; printed with his commentary to *Abot*. Sklov, 1804.

*Novellae* on eight treatises of the Talmud.

*Halakic*.

Commentary on the four parts of the *Shulhan 'Aruk*, namely, *Orah Hazim*.

Sklov, 1803; *Yoreh De'ah*, Grodno, 1806, *Eben ha'-Ezer*, Wilna, 1819; *Hoshen Mishpat*, Koenigsberg.

*Collectanea* on Maimonides. *Novellae* on Asheri.

*Haggadic.*

Glosses to *Pirke Rabbi Eli'eser*. Warsaw, 1832.

Commentary and glosses to the *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* and *Seder 'Olam Zuta*. Sklov, 1801.

Glosses to the *Pesikta*.

*Cabalistic.*

Commentary to the *Sefer Yezirah*. Grodno, 1806.

Commentary to the *Sifra di-Zeni'uta*. Wilna, 1820.

Commentary in eleven volumes on the *Zohar*, of which only a small part was published. Ib., 1810. His commentary on these works is a critical one; he made many corrections in the text and indicated the sources which served the later cabalists.

Commentary on the *Tikkune Zohar*. 5 vols.

Commentary on the *Hekalot*. 2 vols

Commentary on *Ra'ya Mehemna*. 4 vols.

Commentary on both *Idrot*.

Commentary on the *Midrash ha-Ne-'elam*.

Commentary on the *Zohar Hadash*.

*Hadrash Kodesh*, a cabalistic collectanea.  
Cabalistic commentary to the *Pesah Hagadah*. Grodno, 1806.

*Science and Grammar.*

*Ayyal Meshullash*, a treatise on trigonometry, geometry, and some rules of astronomy and algebra, containing 400 rules.

Wilna, 1834.

Treatise on astronomy.

Treatises on the *Tekufot* and *Moladot*.

*Dikduk Eliyahu*, a short Hebrew grammar. Ib., 1833.

*Ma'aseh Torah*, a collection of different subjects.

## CHAPTER VII.

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